

Beating the Odds

by Katharine Palmer
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When Dr. Ron Erkis left for Tempe, Ariz., to cheer on the Buckeyes at the 2002 national championship football game, he was like every other fan – nervous, excited and proud. At the same time, he was living a comfortable life with his wife, Joyce, and spent his days making people smile – literally. Erkis had been an orthodontist for 30 years and was a donor to the Ohio State athletics department for just as long. He loved to play baseball and spend time with his sons, Todd (40), Andy (36) and Brad (34), and with his three grandchildren.

When he returned from Arizona, for some reason, he was not quite himself. Three days later, Erkis found himself heading into the emergency room.

"I thought I had the flu," Erkis said. "My wife was sick herself at the time, so my son, Andy, came and took me to the hospital. I thought I just needed some intravenous fluids."

Suddenly, every one of his organs was about to shut down.

"I had a beta strep infection that caused me to become septic," Erkis said. "My heart stopped and all my organs stopped working. In a short time I went from being in total control of myself and my environment to almost dying."

Erkis was in a coma for 35 days. When he awoke in early February, he was totally paralyzed and had a ventilator stuck in his throat, unable to talk. His blood pressure was so low that the doctors had to use a special kind of medicine that gets blood to the brain and organs. When that is done, it takes blood away from the appendages. He had to have his left leg and all the toes on his right foot amputated.

It was spring when he moved from the hospital to the Wexner Heritage House for rehabilitation so he could begin learning how to move again. In August, he was able to go home for the first time but still couldn't open a bottle of water. Since then, his life has been nothing short of a complete comeback – and a miracle. He did not even miss an Ohio State football game in 2003. Less than a month after he was discharged from Heritage House, he attended the Washington game.

"For the first time in my life, I felt helpless," Erkis said. "But I look at recovery as a challenge. I had to learn how to walk again. I had to get out of my wheelchair and learn how to function again as a human being."

Erkis certainly has been keeping busy. He has started to play golf again, spent the summer coaching his former baseball team and served as an assistant coach to the Bexley High School varsity softball team. It has been an exciting summer for Erkis, as he plans to open his own private orthodontist practice by September or early October in Reynoldsburg.

Of all the things he could not do, being able to treat his patients and put smiles on their faces ranks high on his list of disappointments.

"I'll be starting over from the beginning," Erkis said. "I hope some of the people I have worked with for 30 years will remember who I am."

Even though he has not practiced since he got sick, Erkis has sharpened his skills and knowledge in his field. He has been a clinical assistant professor in the section of orthodontics and pediatric dentistry at Ohio State for 20 years and teaches at Children's Hospital in the graduate program. He was able to start teaching again last November.

Erkis also took his role with the Ohio State athletics department a step further when he and his wife decided to fund an endowed scholarship to the university for a women's basketball player. Sophomore Jessica Davenport, the 2003 Big Ten Co-Freshman of the Year, is currently the recipient of the Ronald S. Erkis Family Athletic Scholarship Fund.

"I have always sort of thought that when you had a chance to give back and you were lucky and blessed enough to be in a position to help other people, you should do it," Erkis said. "I did that in my profession and I wanted to be able to do that with Ohio State athletics as well. I've been a donor for a long time but as time went



on, the development people and I talked about an endowment. My wife and I thought about it and decided it was something we wanted to do.

"I've always enjoyed women's basketball," Erkis said. "Everybody gives money to the men's sports. Not many give to the women's sports. It was something that I wanted to do. I could never understand why women who worked just as hard and played just as competitively never got the recognition or the chance for scholarships. The opportunity for a woman to get an education should be equally important."

The Buckeyes gave back to Erkis when he was sick and in need of some cheering up. Members of the women's basketball team often would go to see him at the Heritage House to encourage him when he had no strength to do anything. Former Buckeye Jamie Lewis (1997-2001) made extra-special trips to visit Erkis a few times a week – not to just cheer him up, but help to get him out of bed.

"I weighed 100 pounds and had lost every bit of muscle I ever had," Erkis said. "I wasn't strong enough to do anything and I knew I had to get into rehab. Jamie came over and donated her time to help me start lifting weights so I could get strong again."

Erkis' love for Ohio State athletics began long ago. As a youngster, he remembers going to The Ohio State Fairgrounds Coliseum even before there was a St. John Arena to see basketball games and also visiting Ohio Stadium.

"Being an Ohio State fan always has been sort of a family tradition," Erkis said. "My dad used to take me to football games. We would wait until halftime because we didn't have tickets. We would go in at halftime and get to see the rest of the game."

The Erkis family always has been an athletic one, as well. Erkis' father played professional baseball with the Cardinals organization and Erkis himself played baseball and wrestled all through high school.

It was probably Erkis' love for physical activity that saved his life. Before his illness he was in excellent shape, ran three to four times a week and lifted weights.

There is no medical explanation as to why Erkis was not one of the 99 percent who die when they become septic from a beta strep infection. The only answer doctors can give is that it was simply a miracle.

"I've had a lot of physicians that don't have any explanation," Erkis said. "I have a wonderful family who stayed with me every second of the day and night. My wife slept with me in the hospital to make sure everything was okay. They cared enough to make sure everything was done right. The people at Mount Carmel East saved my life. The people at Heritage House got me focused on living again. I have a lot of people to thank."

Erkis will remain busy and active this fall as he prepares to open his orthodontic practice. He plans to spend more time with his family and will be busy with a new grandchild coming in November. He also has Ohio State games to attend and, of course, there always is time for a little golf.

"Your focus is really different after you've gone through an experience where everybody says you're going to die," Erkis said. "All of a sudden you realize how thin of a thread life really is. You want to get back to being as useful as you can and enjoying every second you can." ■